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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the use of indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning, focusing on Zimbabwe. It describes the language situation in Zimbabwe, which has three national languages (all of which enjoy some prominence under the current Education Act) and fourteen minority indigenous languages. English plays a central role in Zimbabwe's education system as the language of instruction. It is often introduced on the first day of school. Indigenous languages have not been taken seriously as subjects of study. Instead, there is a heavy emphasis on English proficiency, which jeopardizes proficiency in the mother tongue. Some steps have been taken toward stabilizing Zimbabwe's indigenous languages (e.g., establishment of an African languages project at the university, introduction of an indigenous language newspaper, and increased teaching of second languages to a variety of learners). After discussing the importance of indigenous language usage in teaching and learning, the paper concludes with several steps that should be taken to help stabilize indigenous languages in Zimbabwe, including the following: a stronger move toward strengthening mother tongue education, provision of solid bilingual training for teachers, and provision of money by the Zimbabwean government and educational planners for developing indigenous languages. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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# Using Indigenous Languages for Teaching and Learning in Zimbabwe

Juliet Thondhlana

The question of which language(s) to use for teaching and learning is a crucial one in bilingual and multilingual contexts. In former colonial countries, it is a question that has occupied the agendas of many governments since they attained independence. Some countries have made strides towards addressing it (e.g., Tanzania and Nigeria), although it continues to haunt others. As recently as 1997, African state representatives gathered in Harare, Zimbabwe for an inter-governmental conference on language policies in Africa hosted by UNESCO in order to discuss the question of language planning and policy in Africa. The meeting resulted in the Harare Declaration in which each country represented declared its commitment to the vision for Africa as expressed in the following statements:

- A democratic Africa that seeks to enhance the active participation of all citizens in all institutions—social, economic, political, et cetera;
- A democratic Africa where development is not construed in narrow economic goals but instead in terms of a culturally valued way of living together; and within a broader context of justice, fairness and equity for all; respect for linguistic rights as human rights, including those of minorities;
- In broader terms, Africa that acknowledges its ethno-linguistic pluralism and accepts this as a normal way of life and as a rich resource for development and progress;
- A democratic Africa that seeks to promote peaceful coexistence of people in a society where pluralism does not entail replacement of one language or identity by another, but instead promotes complementary of functions as well as co-operation and a sense of common destiny;
- Africa where democratisation in a pluralistic context seeks to produce through sound and explicit language policies Africans who are able to operate effectively at local levels as well as at regional and international levels;
- A democratic Africa that provides the environment for the promotion and preservation of an African identity as well as the cultivation of a proud and confident African personality;
- Africa where scientific and technological discourse is conducted in the national languages as part of our cognitive preparation for facing the challenges of the next millennium. (Chimhundu et al., 1997)

The representatives made a commitment to seriously take positive steps towards implementing language planning and policy that, among other issues, takes into account the raising of the status and usage of indigenous languages. In this paper, I raise arguments for the use of indigenous languages as languages of



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learning and teaching, with special reference to Zimbabwe. The paper will give a brief description of the language situation in Zimbabwe. It will then address the question of why it is important to use indigenous languages as languages of learning and teaching. It will also consider what steps Zimbabwe has taken towards stabilizing its indigenous languages before and after the Harare Declaration. The paper will conclude by putting forward suggestions as to how Zimbabwe can implement the use of indigenous languages in education. It is hoped that this discussion, although it will focus on Zimbabwe, will be relevant to other countries in Africa and elsewhere that are faced with similar linguistic problems.

**Zimbabwe: Language Situation**

Zimbabwe is a Southern African country. It has a population of about 13 million made up of broadly African and European categories of population. There are also smaller groups of people of Asian origin. Zimbabwe is, therefore, a multilingual/multicultural nation. There are three main national languages in Zimbabwe. These are Shona, Ndebele, and English. Of the three, English is the national official language; Shona and Ndebele are national languages. In addition to the three main national languages, there are fourteen minority indigenous languages as follows:

- Kalanga (predominantly spoken Zimbabwe but also spoken in Botswana)
- Nyanja/Chewa (predominantly spoken in Malawi)
- Tonga (predominantly spoken in Zambia; also spoken in Namibia, Botswana, and Mozambique)
- Nambya (Zimbabwean)
- Hwesa (Zimbabwean)
- Shangani (predominantly spoken in South Africa; also spoken in Mozambique)
- Barwe (predominantly spoken in Mozambique)
- Sotho (predominantly spoken in Lesotho, also Africa)
- Venda (predominantly spoken in South Africa)
- Chikunda (predominantly spoken in Mozambique; also Zambia)
- Xhosa (predominantly spoken in South Africa)
- Sena (predominantly spoken in Mozambique)
- Tshwawo (Khoisan) (also spoken in Botswana, Namibia, and Zambia)
- Tswana (predominantly spoken in Botswana and South Africa)

The minority groups constitute approximately 10% of the total Zimbabwean population. Six of these minority languages, namely, Kalanga, Shangani, Chewa, Venda, Tonga, and Nambya are officially recognized.

Zimbabwe, like many African countries, tends to follow the policy of using the former colonial language (English in this case) as the official language of much of parliament, trade and industry, the mass media, and education. Although Shona and Ndebele are now accepted for use in some formal domains, such as in

the senate and as a language of instruction in lower primary education, English continues to dominate as the national official language. In education, English continues to be the dominant language. The latest Education Act (1987, as amended in 1990) states that:

1. The three main languages of Zimbabwe, namely Shona, Ndebele and English, shall be taught in all primary schools from the first grade as follows—
   a. Shona and English in all areas where the mother-tongue of the majority of the residents is Shona or
   b. Ndebele and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority of the residents is Ndebele.
3. Prior to the fourth grade, either of the languages referred to in paragraph (a) or (b) of sub-section (1) may be used as the medium of instruction, depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.
4. From the fourth grade, English shall be the medium of instruction provided that Shona or Ndebele shall be taught as subjects on an equal-time allocation as the English language.
5. In areas where minority languages exist, the Minister may authorise the teaching of such languages in primary schools in addition to those specified in sub-section (1), (2) and (3). (Part XI, Section 55, p.255)

As shown above, although all the major languages enjoy some small degree of prominence under the Act, English continues to enjoy the central role, as indicated in sub-section (3) and in the non-obligatory nature of the early primary school mother-tongue instruction. Further, this recognition is largely in word only. In Zimbabwe, most schools prefer to use English from the outset to ensure their students' proficiency in English, which is considered the language of power and economic wellbeing. It should be noted that, when they start school, most of these children have very low or no proficiency in English. Teachers and parents are concerned that, after the third grade, when they have to switch to English, the children's low level of proficiency in English would make learning difficult and detract from whatever they would have learnt so far in the mother tongue. In the case of minority languages, it has been noted that implementation of this Act is even more difficult because the few teachers who are proficient in the languages are not deployed in the relevant areas. This is because deployment of teachers does not involve consideration of the question of lower primary medium of instruction.

Another fact that demonstrates the continued dominance of English is the fact that the minimum pass level in Zimbabwe is five "O" (Ordinary) level subjects, and one of these five subjects should be English. Generally, without a pass in "O" level English, one cannot be considered for further education and employment. It should be noted that Shona, Ndebele, or any of the other indigenous languages are, currently, not acceptable substitutes. On the teaching

of Shona as a subject, Chiwome and Thondhlana (1990) have noted that, even in the teaching of Shona subjects, some teachers prefer to use English as the medium of instruction and some Shona students prefer to write their essays about Shona in English when they are given a choice. However, research has revealed some degree of code switching between English and indigenous languages in classrooms of grades and forms beyond grade three (Chitiga, 1994). The significance of this practice is yet to be determined. There is also an added problem. In Zimbabwe, as well as elsewhere in Africa, bilingualism has tended to be subtractive because the socio-cultural attributes of indigenous languages have been denigrated in favour of those of the colonial language, which is considered to be more prestigious. This has even resulted in some Africans, educated through the medium of a colonial language, shunning their mother tongues (Sure & Webb, 2000). It is not surprising, therefore, that, in Zimbabwe, English continues to dominate the education system. There has been, in many cases, little or no conscious effort to promote students' cognitive skills (memory, ability to generalize, ability to grasp relationships such as cause and effect, ability to predict consequences, ability to grasp the essential message of a text); their affective skills (positive attitude to work, loyalty to one's country, tolerance for diversity); and their social skills (ability to work together with, communicate, and support others) in their mother tongue. Consequently, there have been no efforts to promote the use of the mother tongue in technological and intellectual discourse.

The above situation has had some of the following serious consequences for educational development in Zimbabwe:

- Indigenous languages have not been taken seriously as subjects of study.
- Too much emphasis has been placed on proficiency in English, which, in many cases, is introduced to children from the first day of school.
- Proficiency in the mother tongue is, in some cases, jeopardized because teachers and parents focus on learning English at school and home. It is saddening that, in some cases, children come to school proficient in their mother-tongues but soon begin to lose this as the focus is shifted to developing proficiency in English both at school and home.

Despite what appears to be a negative picture regarding Zimbabwe's indigenous languages, some steps have been taken towards stabilizing them. Notable are the following:

- The launching of the ALLEX (African Languages and Literature Lexicography) project at the University of Zimbabwe, which, among other activities, is involved in the development of dictionaries and the creation of literary and technical terminology in indigenous languages. So far, the project has seen the publishing of the first monolingual dictionary in Shona, and another one is expected soon in the Ndebele language.

- The institutionalization of the ALLEX project as the ALRI (African Languages Research Institute) at the University of Zimbabwe. This institute is, in general, responsible for the systematic studying, documenting, and developing of the languages of Zimbabwe.
- The setting up of a national policy advisory panel in 1997. This panel has since submitted its recommendations to government concerning how a comprehensive national language policy should be formulated.
- There are moves to make Shona and Ndebele national official languages along with English as well as to officially recognize all minority indigenous languages of Zimbabwe. This has yet to be gazetted and implemented.
- Development of fictional literature and language books in indigenous languages, particularly in the case of Shona and Ndebele.
- A significant increase in the teaching of Shona and Ndebele as second languages to a variety of learners, both foreign and local (especially in predominantly native-English speaking schools—though the teaching is still unsatisfactory).
- The introduction of a Shona-Ndebele newspaper (though more should be introduced).
- Some, though limited, use of some indigenous languages in parliament, business, education, and media.

Although these are steps in the right direction, it seems obvious that Zimbabwe needs to give the question of the status and usage of indigenous languages some very serious thought. In the next section, I look at why it is important to introduce indigenous languages in education as the languages of teaching and learning and as subjects of study.

**Indigenous Languages in Education**

On the question of the status and usage of indigenous languages versus those of an ex-colonial language, arguments have been put forward for maintaining the exclusive official status and usage of the ex-colonial language. Sure and Webb (2000) observe that, although the use of colonial languages in education has led to serious problems, it has also brought with it "enormous advantages such as access to knowledge, creativity and entertainment of the entire western world, as well as global trade and commerce" (p. 126). They further argue that "European languages have become an integral part of the lives of the African people, and are indeed resources to be nurtured and developed" (Sure & Webb, 2000, p. 126).

There is also the argument that learning a former colonial language does not necessarily involve taking on a new cultural identity. This is attested to by work coming out of English schools world-wide, which has shown that it is possible to adapt a language to give expression to the cultural and intellectual peculiarities of another world. Yet, as noted by Williams and Snipper (1990, p. 50), language encompasses not only communication, but also heritage, culture,

and feelings. It is, therefore, important to note that maintaining a speaker's native language has an affective dimension, that of enhancing the speakers' self-concepts and their pride in their cultural background and identity.

There are other reasons why it is important to use indigenous languages as the languages of teaching and learning. First, as argued by Kembo (2000), cognitive and affective development occurs more effectively in a language that the learner knows very well. This is particularly important because, as reported in the literature, most children from Zimbabwe and elsewhere who are learning through a former colonial language are not proficient in the colonial language when they enter school since their exposure to the school language is often minimal in the home. Second, it is argued that learning in general (including second language learning) occurs more effectively if the required cognitive development has already taken place through the use of a first language as a language of learning. Cummins (1984) argues that "optimal first language education provides a rich cognitive preparation for the acquisition of a second language" (in Kembo, 2000, p. 289) and that the literacy and cognitive skills already acquired in the first language provide easy transition to second-language medium education.

The above points underscore the importance of using indigenous languages in education. There are steps that Zimbabwe can take to achieve this goal. This paper concludes by listing some of these in the following section.

**Conclusion: The Way Forward**

Bilingualism/multilingualism is a reality for most people living in bilingual/multilingual environments. Any solution to linguistic problems that plague bilingual/multilingual societies has, therefore, to be sought in the context of bilingualism/multilingualism. There was a time when, owing to ignorance, bilingualism/multilingualism was viewed with suspicion. It was thought that bilingualism creates more tasks for the brain than is necessary, leads to mental confusion as the child tries to work out which language to use in a particular communicative situation, slows down acquisition of the second language, leads to a split personality, and creates cultural and political division (Sure & Webb, 2000). Concerning the last point, writing about language and colonial power with specific reference to Belgian Congo, Fabian (1986) observes that, in colonial Africa, multilingualism was viewed as a threat to order. Use of many languages was equated with confusion. Even use of two languages was perceived as making the "orderly exercise of government difficult" ( p. 43). It was, therefore, suggested that attempts be made to remove such disorder by radical "unification," that is, exclusive use of one language. Failing that, it was suggested that there be established hierarchical relations among languages. This was because freedom of coexistence, interaction, and competition amongst languages was seen as a threat to authority. The colonial language came out "naturally" on top as the exclusive language of the highest levels of administration.

Recent research, however, has revealed that, contrary to earlier beliefs, bilingualism has a number of advantages. Peal and Lambert (1962, in Sure &

Webb, 2000) concluded that bilinguals perform better in intelligence tests than do monolinguals, that they have greater mental flexibility and superior abstract thinking and concept formation, and that bilingualism stimulates further IQ development. It is noted, however, that bilingualism can only be positive when children are trained to a level of stable bilingualism, where competence in the mother tongue is comparable to that in the second language, what Cummins calls the "threshold level" (1979, in Sure and Webb, 2000). Bilinguals with a high level of bilingual proficiency showed positive cognitive effects while limited bilinguals, weak in both mother tongue and second language, showed negative cognitive effects (Toukmaa & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1997, in Williams & Snipper, 1990, p. 55).

In seeking to stabilize Zimbabwean languages, it should be noted that, in Zimbabwe and in Africa in general, multilingualism is a norm. Many children grow up in environments where more than one indigenous language is spoken, and they develop proficiency in one or more of these (Sure & Webb, 2000, p. 122). Also, as noted earlier, colonial languages have become an integral part of the lives of most African people and should be nurtured and developed. It appears here that the way forward should be to turn a bad past into something positive, and bilingual education seems to offer acceptable possibilities. The term bilingual education is used to describe "any system of school education in which, at a given moment in time and for a varying amount of time, simultaneously or consecutively, instruction is planned and given in at least two languages" (Hamers & Blanc, 1992, p. 189).

Hamers and Blanc (1992) have identified three categories of bilingual education as follows:

- Instruction is given in both languages;
- Instruction is given first in the first language, and the pupil is taught until such time as he or she is able to use the second language as a medium of learning;
- The largest part of instruction is given through the second language, and the first language is introduced later—first as a subject and later as a medium of instruction.

In my view, in the spirit of promoting bilingualism, the first option, instruction given in both languages, would be most desirable. However, in the Zimbabwean context and elsewhere in Africa, one has to be realistic and consider the practicability of such a move, in view of the multiplicity of languages within most countries. Governments would need to set aside vast amounts of money for the development of dictionaries, teaching materials, and bilingual teacher-training programs. That kind of money may not be readily available, and the process takes time to plan and implement.

A more practicable alternative in the short term is the second option above. Initially, a local indigenous language would be used throughout the primary grades while English would be taught only as a subject. I suggest here an increased

period of mother tongue instruction to allow adequate time for the acquisition and development of cognitive, affective, and social skills through the mother tongue. This would be in line with the Language Transferability Theory (Cummins, 1981, in Williams & Snipper, 1990, p. 54). According to this theory, languages have a common underlying proficiency, and the concepts understood in one language are transferable to the other. Indigenous language instruction would continue until the indigenous languages were sufficiently developed to be used effectively alongside English. I envision a situation where, in a Ndebele-English environment, for example, a teacher could choose to use either of the two languages in his or her class or could just code-switch as necessary. Furthermore, students could be free to write their assignments and examinations in the language of their choice. There is, however, a need to carry out more research to determine factors underlying bilingual education typologies. Social, historical, ideological, and other factors need to be examined in the context of Zimbabwe.

In conclusion, listed below are some suggested steps that need to be taken towards stabilizing indigenous languages in Zimbabwe:

- The Zimbabwean government should, with guidance from the National Policy Advisory Panel, consider seriously the recommendations of that panel and set in motion the formulation of a comprehensive national language policy that takes into account the use of indigenous languages in education.
- There must be a stronger move towards strengthening mother tongue education in order to provide a firm foundation for later education in both the indigenous and English languages. In this case, lengthen the period for mother tongue instruction in order to give adequate time for skills development and consolidation. In this regard, Cummins (1981, in Williams & Snipper, 1990, p. 54) suggests that languages have a common underlying proficiency. He argues that when concepts are learned in the stronger language, they can later be expressed in the second language without having to be relearned. The concepts known in the first language are, therefore, transferable to the second language.
- Teachers must be provided with solid bilingual training.
- Language planners must give the former colonial language and indigenous languages equal functional status. If indigenous languages are used in teaching and in school subject exams, they will gain prestige, which will increase the need to study them seriously.
- The Zimbabwean government and educational planners must put money into the development of indigenous languages—for lexicography work, development of grammars, translation, teaching materials production, and bilingual teacher training.
- African governments should be encouraged to harmonize African languages. Many African languages are spoken across borders. In many cases, what is a minority language in one country is a majority language

in another. Countries like this do not have to duplicate efforts in terms of materials development, for example. African states should, therefore, work together to share materials and manpower training just as in the case of English across borders. This would reduce the cost of developing indigenous languages.

- Bilingualism/multilingualism should be nurtured. As observed by Sure and Webb (2000), first, a person trained in his or her own mother tongue is likely to have a more positive self-image. Second, a bilingual is more culturally and linguistically flexible and has respect for other languages and their speakers. This is particularly important because there is now increased interaction among nations.

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